After the Eurocrats‘ Dream, the Contingence of the History

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Daniel Innerarity Di 22 Nov 2016

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The Eurocrats' dream was the stealth Europe. The Monnet method of bureaucratic integration has been mechanical and furtive, dominated by necessity. The principal leaders of integration, on the right and the left, have been driven by a crude determinism that presumed that economic development would inevitably lead to desired institutional improvements. The hidden hand of functional imperatives has been more important than reflection and choices, as if integration could be carried out without the need to make express decisions of the kind that are contained in constitutional moments. All of this has given way to an incrementalism without explicit decisions, which the least benevolent among us could interpret as a directionless process. The integration strategy consisted of conceding primacy to processes over results and assuming that success was guaranteed (Majone 2014, 216). In the golden age of integration, the image of a technocratic and distant Europe did not imply any type of reproach but a neutral observation or even something expressly meant to help achieve the objectives of integration. There was no need to count on the explicit support of the citizenry because they did not seem concerned about matters of integration, nor did they understand them.

But this is not our situation; we are after that dream, as the authors of this remarkable book remind us. Europe continues to delegate, of course, but it cannot function without a greater degree of tacit democratic consent. The EU is no longer a collective of technocratic institutions and agencies that resolve problems of coordination between democratically legitimized governments without the people taking an interest in them. It is no longer true that supranational affairs lack political salience for the citizenry, at least not in the era of a globalized economy, climate change or global migration. In virtue of the crisis, it is not possible to continue affirming that EU politics are principally regulatory without taking their redistributive effects into consideration. In case anyone had any doubt, the crisis has made our interdependence more obvious. The economic crisis has probably brought about a politicization of European affairs that the constitutional process barely achieved.

But there is another dream after the dream: considering that what now comes is also necessary. Today's management manuals and self-help books repeat that we should not waste a good crisis. Is all this confidence in the benefits of "dire straits" justified? Can this be said about the current crisis through which the European Union is passing and should we hope that it turns into a great opportunity to delve deeper into integration (Böckenförde 2012)?

In the first place, some things have not survived their crises, so addressing their beneficial potentiality is only one part of history, the part which is told by the survivors. There are examples in humanity's history of crises that have literally finished off that which should supposedly have been revived. As Paul Valéry noted, we now know that civilizations (in other words, institutions, organizations, projects) are mortal, which means that there are things that did not survive particular crises. Since we only know those that did survive, we forget that many possibilities were destroyed. Only time will tell whether the agitation produced by the crisis is sufficient to renew a democracy as complex as the EU's, in other words, to accept a certain form of government of *the others* and share responsibilities of justice beyond the national realm.

In any case, it is clear that the momentum of need or the fear of the abyss is, at least, an impetus for accelerating decisions, even if this does not assure their rationality. From the most banal to the most dramatic, the experience of sharing a destiny with others has increased our scales of reference, not only in Europe, but on a planetary level, strengthening our emotional identification and expanding our sense of responsibility. In a post-Westphalian configuration, the elements are not isolated and self-sufficient units that wear out identities, with exclusive policies and a net distinction between internal and external affairs. The overlap is more norm than exception, and the type of politics that should be carried out is only explained if we keep the profound interrelation that exists between elements in mind.

The future of Europe is not written. European actors have managed on more than a few occasions to take

productive advantage of crises to increase integration, which does not guarantee that they will continue to do so in the future. Crises are constellations of great uncertainty, moments of change and decision-making, in which great errors can also occur. Presuming that the history of integration provides us with good arguments to be optimists, no one points out that this time may be different and that the shrewdness that tends to make its appearance in the midst of anguish does not share in the opportune moment.

The economic crisis has been revealed as a decision-making space in which the urgency of the moment and the convenience of a long-term vision coincide; if the former promotes a save-yourself-if-you-can mentality, the latter feeds our cooperative intelligence. This is probably one of the most piercing paradoxes of the current economic crisis: that while the convenience of revising the whole system of values that has led us here is obvious, the same instability seems to advise us to leave things as they were. Crises are moments of change for the same reasons that they can be moments of conservation. Our choice of one or the other is not required by any manual for escaping crises, but depends on the decisions we adopt, freely but with conditions.

One of the most remarkable insight of this book is to put the debate about the future of Europe in a frame of historical contingence. The Europe that could be different is, for the same reasons, the one that is not condemned to success, as the crisis has revealed to us, after decades of calm necessity. The first sign of alarm may not have been the 2005 rejection of the Constitutional Treaty by French and Dutch voters, but the fact that we were so surprised by it; our surprise revealed that we were not thinking about a free and, therefore, reversible process that was open to scrutiny and even failure.

In the famous *Federalist Papers,* Madison recommended that we understand constitutions as a result of "reflection and choice" rather than as a matter of "accident and force". But a choice implies contingency, in other words, that consent cannot be assumed as given once and for all (Weiler 1999). While it may seem paradoxical, those who understand the logic of human constructions know it is not: "only a sense of freedom toward European integration will bring trust to go further and deeper in European integration" (Cheneval 2013, 15).

Of course we should not underestimate the determining and limiting context in which European integration moves, with multiple actors and a good number of constrictions in play, but neither should we underestimate the force of human freedom. The current debate oscillates between the functionalism that has, until now, done without citizen decisions in every possible way, on the one extreme, and the illusion of trusting everything to social spontaneity or the foundational moments of a constituent nature. What both groups seem to fail to recognize is that, like any process of a political nature, European integration is something that should be governed, something that is situated between functional imperatives and the immediacy of decisions.

It would be a question of understanding the usefulness of greater political integration as the democratic response to interdependence and not as a reason imposed by the logic of integration. Integration is a free option and not the inevitable consequence of a process that escapes our control (Maduro 2012). The future of Europe is a matter of choice, it depends on free decisions, even though the decisions must be taken by "weak, uncommitted and cross-pressured national leaders squeezed by national problems, populist movements, EU constraints and global markets" (Mény 2012, 164). But the fact that the decisions are adopted in the midst of many restrictions does not mean that they stop being free decisions.

I do not have a magic formula to manage the full democratization of Europe, but I would like to make a modest proposal of democratization centered on the type of discourse we must maintain, agreeing with the authors of this book. It is possible that we cannot do much, but let us at least begin by speaking about this properly or, better yet, not speaking as if everything referring to the European Union were necessary and inevitable. This would at least allow us to alleviate the intelligibility deficit to the extent to which we stop suggesting that nothing related to European integration has anything to do with free decisions and responsibility.

Let us then begin by abandoning the functionalist language of the irresistible and of imperative needs with barely any discourse that appeals to our free command over the future. The practices of the European Union, which are, on the one hand, consensual and gradual through procedural accommodations, also constitute a system that favors concealed or covert, democratically non-authorized decisions, sometimes in the form of non-decisions or subjected to technocratic objectivities. Even Altiero Spinelli's "federate or perish" may be true, but

speaks the language of coercion. All our lexicon is pure necessity; none of it speaks to the citizenry's free decision; it is flammable material in the hands of the populists who seek motives to denounce a conspiracy of elites. The search for popular adherence begins with the use of a language that appeals to liberty, which sets aside inevitability, threats and irreversibility.

How can we conceive of Europe as a political object, in other words, as a space configured by free decisions? As its discourses reveal, some intergovernmentalists and some transnationalists have become ensconced in a comfortable historical determinism. They are only differentiated by the direction they thought they could divine in that determination: whether in the insuperability of the framework of inter-state negotiation or in the inevitability that this framework is going to be overrun. In the face of these forms of surrender before a supposed historic need, the only democratically acceptable imperative is that Europe needs to be politicized. And politicizing a process means reducing immutable conditions and increasing the arena in which things should be decided in common, but without being ingenuous enough to think that all these things are being carried out in a void that is completely compliant to our decisions.

Let us begin with an acknowledgement that reminds us of the extent to which political questions combine aspects of human initiative with processes that are only partially governable. "There is nothing in the world of politics which does not spring from human activity, although there is much that is not a consequence of human design" (Oakeshott 1996, 20). Recent European history is the history of free beginnings and not so much that of an inevitable process to which we must submit (Middelaar 2012). No institutional device, no theory of democratic governance can anticipate or take the place of the creativity of history or predetermine adequate solutions to political problems we are going to confront.

A few years ago, there was an interesting debate about the politicization of the EU. The argument focused on how to make European affairs intelligible and involve the citizenry in its construction (Hix / Bartolini 2006; Magnette / Papadopoulus 2008). The proposals revolved around known categories such as recuperating the antagonism between the left and right or introducing procedures of direct participation, which are both properties that presumably characterize national politics. If the debate did not afford terribly novel results, it was, on the one hand, because it limited itself to recommending the transfer of national categories to the European plane (precisely at a time when those categories were entirely worn out there) and, on the other, because it was assumed that politics can only be an interesting reality if it includes moments of exceptionality, something lacking, for many of those who participated in the discussion, in the consensual and complex politics of the Union. Only in this way would the emotion, the antagonism and the exception that seem characteristic of the political be possible. While the federalists long for these properties to revitalize that which is communitarian, the intergovernmentalists believe they are irreproducible on the placid and technocratic European level. Without delving into the depths of this question with all the exhaustiveness that it undeniably deserves, I would like to simply point out that there are other ways of politicizing, within what I would call "the normality of liberty" characteristic of "post-heroic" politics.

It is odd to confirm the extent to which we are indebted to Carl Schmitt's exceptionalism when we think about how to revitalize the public space. In exceptional crises, Schmitt's followers expand as if they had been returned to the only scenario in which they know how to develop. In these moments, the idea that politics is the power to define the state of exception tends to recover a degree of plausibility. I personally prefer to understand politics as the ability to return as soon as possible to normality, and for that reason, I am rather skeptical about a supposed return to good sense thanks to history's exceptional upheavals. I believe that "the political" in Europe should be sought in another arena, closer to freedom than to necessity. Either we hit the mark when politicizing Europe—making it intelligible and interesting—in a way that does not need to be epic and dramatic, or we will not manage to do so at all.

When we talk about the future of Europe—as with anything whose future strikes us as particularly unpredictable—we tend to respond with psychological devices such as the one that gives the protagonism of the discussion to optimists and pessimists. Regarding the articulation between nation states and the European Union, the mood tends to function like communicating vessels: those who are pessimistic about the possibilities of greater integration are pessimistic because they have greater optimism regarding the ability of the nation state to fulfill the functions we give it and vice versa; those who regard the future of the Union with optimism tend to be

pessimistic about the future of the nation states. In this debate, everyone is optimistic about something and pessimistic about the other. Some people overestimate the power of the nation states, and others tend to overestimate the power of the Union (Champeau 2014).

Optimism and pessimism can be two forms of surrendering to necessity. The language of liberty is instead a language that speaks to us of an indeterminate future, of uncertainty, openness and unpredictability, of what can end well or poorly, like any human feat throughout history. Politics is conditional liberty, choices in the midst of constraints. Politics is always freedom in context, even and particularly within frameworks that are as complex as the EU. In a democracy politics is always done by people who are awake.

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